

Abused, rejected and poisoned: the plight of the Kosovo Roma



ANALYSIS
BY ISABEL FONSECA

An institutionalised crime against the Roma people is taking place in eastern Europe. A forthcoming report from Human Rights Watch documents an ongoing scandal at Mitrovica, in northern Kosovo, which began 10 years ago in the wake of the looting and burning to the ground of the entire settlement known as the Roma Mahalla.

This was once a vibrant home to some 8,000 people, most of them Muslims. But the inhabitants fled, fearing attacks by ethnic Albanians who saw the Roma as "collaborators" with the Serbs, with whom they share a language. Some 6,500 of these Mitrovica Roma have never returned – indeed, only about a tenth of a prewar population of 200,000 Kosovan Roma remain. The Nato-led Kosovo Force did not intervene at the time in the blighting of the Mahalla, but the UN High Commissioner for Refugees was quick to help the newly homeless, organising food and, over some months, places to live until their settlement could be restored.

However, these makeshift camps – with the exception of one installed in an old Yugoslav army barracks 30 miles (48km) away – are situated by the dams of an old lead mine, beside a three-storey-high "black mountain", or toxic slag heap, "at the epicentre of contamination", according to Wanda Troszczynska Van Genderen, a researcher with Human Rights Watch (HRW) and author of the report. The defunct Trepcia mine complex constitutes an entire region long known for its toxicity and therefore being unsuitable even for temporary use, let alone a decade of inactivity and neglect.

The proximity of the slag heaps and the poor camp conditions predictably guaranteed serious and worsening contamination. There is limited heat and little access to clean water, no coherent or sustained treatment for lead poisoning and the poor diet comprises little more than bread and tea, said a nurse at the camps. In 2004 human rights activists started to protest about the deteriorating health of the Roma residents, and particularly the youngest residents, who absorb lead more easily. They reported children with black or bleeding gums, headaches, stunted growth, high blood pressure, epilepsy, constant diarrhoea, vomiting, disorientation, convulsions, extreme nervousness and "hysteria".

Twenty years ago Václav Havel, a human rights campaigner and the former Czech president, said the fate of the Roma would be a litmus test for Europe's new democracies. Of a world population of perhaps 16 million, some 10 million Roma live in Europe, and overwhelmingly in the former eastern bloc.

Europe is failing the Havel test. A 2005 Unicef report gives some idea: 84% of Roma in Bulgaria, 88% in Romania and 91% in Hungary were living



Roma youngsters at a Kosovan refugee camp.

Photograph by Carsten Koall



below the poverty line. And in Romania – where the Roma account for as much as a quarter of the population under 18 years old – the already low literacy rate is precipitously dropping, along with school attendance.

Indeed, since the fall of communism, and despite the injection of many millions of euros, from national governments and private sources, life for this European population is significantly harder by all the usual indices of health, education, employment and housing, and in some places even endangered. And the violence has spread to the west, as the attacks on Roma families in Northern Ireland clearly demonstrated.

Arson by mob was a Romanian trademark 15 years ago. In the Czech Republic, instead of clearing out the Gypsy communities, local government built a wall around some of them – while Czech skinheads were easily the most determined perpetrators of serious civilian violence in Europe. Italy is the scene of more recent mob action – for example, outside Naples, where a large settlement was razed. There have also been alarming responses from Italy's government, including the serious, if ultimately doomed, proposal to fingerprint all Roma under 14.

In European elections this month, far-right parties, campaigning on anti-Roma platforms, made unprecedented gains in Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia, whose Slovak National party gained its first seat in the European parliament.

Almost 700 Roma remain at the Kosovo camps – following unnatural deaths, miscarriages and the births of scores of children with irreversible brain damage. More than half the residents of the camps

are under 10 years old and everyone born in them is brain-damaged. Since 2007 the UN mission in Kosovo has discontinued medical treatment for the poisoning, along with systematic blood testing, while weekly distributions of milk and fruit and vegetables have also ceased – though with local vegetables registering lead levels at 176 times the safety mark, they may be better off without them.

The biblical suffering of Roma has for centuries been met by biblical indifference. Because one minority in the heart of Europe is demonstrably the victim of this crime it is impossible to dismiss the effects of racism. A parallel might be found in the long and disgraceful history of coerced sterilisation of Roma women in Hungary, the Czech Republic, and especially Slovakia.

The lead poisoning case is worse in one important particular. The UN created the camps, and, along with the Kosovo authorities, bears legal responsibility for these people. It is a responsibility they all continue to flout, despite the urging of many outspoken well-wishers. These include European MPs, Roma and human rights activists, environmental engineers, lawyers, journalists, the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, the Danish Refugee Council, Norwegian Church Aid, the World Health Organisation, and at least one baroness.

Recriminations and rumours swirl around this sad saga: the Roma were poisoned not by the mines or the giant slag heaps, but instead by their habit of smelting car batteries – stolen ones, naturally. The Roma have also been accused of rejecting offers of housing outside the camps. This is true, and understandable, as the proposed alternatives were either in the contamination zone as well, or else prohibitively far from any source of employment, welfare or education.

The talk is about as toxic as the site itself. Only one fact remains undisputed: the Roma are still there.

*Kosovo: Poisoned by Lead, Rights Abused in Mitrovica's Roma Camps, is published by Human Rights Watch on 24 June. Isabel Fonseca is the author of *Bury My Standing: The Gypsies and their Journey*.*